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Enthusiasm, craft and authenticity on the High Street: micropubs as ‘community fixers’

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Abstract: The retail recession has left a legacy of vacant shops on many shopping streets, with closures having significant consequences for local populations. But several new ‘pop-up’ formats are bucking this trend by bringing community-oriented forms of consumption back to the High Street. The micropub is a notable example, a small-scale venue selling real ale that has taken over a vacant shop premise, usually in smaller and struggling town centres. The rapid take-up of the micropub concept has attracted considerable attention, suggesting a model for retail regeneration based on community-mindedness and a close relationship between owner and customer. Based on ethnographic research in micropubs, alongside interviews with landlords, this paper suggests that their success is dependent upon the *enthusiasm* of landlords and customers alike, with such ‘cultures of enthusiasm’ encouraged via the nostalgic motifs of craft, tradition and Britishness that inform the curation of these seemingly ‘authentic’ spaces. The paper concludes that the micropub offers a form of socially-connective consumption highly valued by some, but stresses that there are clear limits to the ability of such spaces to be ‘community fixers’ given enthusiasm for real ale remains a distinctly white, male, and middle-aged pursuit.

Keywords: consumption, retail, enthusiasm, alcohol, pop up urbanism, nostalgia

Introduction

Since the global recession of 2007-09, there has been serious discussion about the vitality and viability of the British High Street, with the collapse of well-known retail chains precipitating unprecedented rates of vacancy (as many as one in three units on some shopping streets) (Wrigley and Dolega, 2011). Given rates of vacancy are most pronounced in areas characterised by social deprivation, this has had particularly negative consequences for those populations most reliant on their local shopping streets for both their day-to-day shopping and social life, leaving local authorities and business associations scrambling for new ideas to restore the fortunes of these streets (Hubbard 2017). Here, ‘pop-up’ has been widely promoted as a quick fix for the blight of empty shops (Harris, 2015), with advocates of such solutions suggesting pop-up galleries, libraries, and cafés can be particularly valuable as anchors of retail regeneration as they constitute inclusive

spaces that can combat the social isolation and loneliness sometimes experienced by more deprived members of the community (Jones et al, 2016; O'Brien, 2016).

In the midst of such debates about the importance of cultivating community on the High Street, the rise of the micropub is worthy of comment. Not to be confused with US-style 'brewpubs' or microbrewery 'tap rooms' that are making their presence felt in larger UK towns and cities – especially London (Dennett and Page, 2017) - micropubs are essentially 'pop-up' venues in small, vacant, retail units that would be unsuitable for more traditional pubs and do not have room for brewing on the premise. Despite their limited size – they seldom seat more than 20 drinkers at a time - they are attracting favourable headlines because of their perceived role as community-minded, sociable premises which are bringing vacant and even derelict spaces back into life (Hawkes, 2011). As such there has been a rapid adoption of this format at a time when pubs in general are declining in number (Jones et al, 2013). This growth – from around 10 in 2002 to 250 in 2016 - is noteworthy given the general anxiety about the centrality of alcohol consumption within the night-time economy: while many of the large, corporate-run pubs that dominate some High Streets are vilified as sites of carnivalesque excess (Hadfield 2006; Haydock 2015), micropubs are, in contrast, widely discoursed as constituting a virtuous presence on the High Street despite the fact they specialise in beers with high alcohol content. So while the opening of new town centre pubs is regularly opposed by local residents and businesses because of concerns about late night noise and nuisance, it is notable that micropubs are rarely contested in the planning or licensing process, and are widely lauded as 'community fixers' (West, 2015).

In this paper, I examine the micropub as a 'no-frills' pop-up concept that has acquired a degree of longevity (and apparent popularity) by virtue of its reliance on a particular collision of culture, creativity and economic practice. Here, I show that micropubs have successfully valorised a particular commodity – 'real ale' – by emphasizing particular notions of simplicity, locality, and tradition. My conclusion is that the depiction of micropubs as successful, socially-connective spaces is one that rests on questionable associations being made between Britishness, traditions of brewing and the importance of alcohol as a lubricator of sociality, suggesting that there are clear limits to their potential role in High Street regeneration. Throughout, I contextualise my observations on the consumption of these spaces within literatures on the geographies of enthusiasm (e.g. DeLyser, 2016), curation (e.g. Joosse and Hracs, 2015) and nostalgia (e.g. Watson and Wells, 2005), as well as those more narrowly concerned with the geographies of alcohol consumption (e.g. Jayne et al, 2008; Wilkinson, 2017).

Method

This paper is based on participation-observation in micropubs between 2011 and 2016 (involving c. 200-300 hours in total in around 30 separate premises located mainly in the South East of England, constituting around 15% of the national total). This was complemented with interviews/surveys with owners/landlords designed to explore motivations for opening micropubs and experiences of running them. The latter were conducted via a combination of c. 10 in situ interviews, c. 10 telephone interviews and c. 20 email exchanges amounting to 40 in total (2 with women, 38 with men). Supporting the interviews and ethnographic participant-observation, media coverage of micropubs in the national and local press was also analysed: although the national coverage of the phenomena has been mainly limited to specialist press articles, at a local level each new pub opening appears to have been reported by local newspapers in a positive manner (to date, there has only been one proposed micropub that has been refused permission to open, in this case because of its proximity to a nursery, and concerns about potential noise nuisance).

As drinking in these spaces was key to my method, it is worth reflecting on the challenges of ethnographic work in spaces of alcohol consumption. Micropubs do not generally offer non-alcoholic drinks - and in any case a solitary consumer visiting such spaces and not buying a pint would be viewed with some suspicion or even derision. This given, my standard approach to researching micropubs has been to visit them unannounced, at a lunchtime, and to buy a single drink which I would consume over the course of an hour or so, typically whilst reading a book or newspaper. As I outline below, encountering middle-aged men like me drinking alone in such venues is not unusual, and on occasions I would be drawn into conversation with other unaccompanied drinkers, usually beginning with a polite enquiry about what they were drinking, before moving to ask about how often they had been to the pub in question. Sometimes, if the venue was quiet and they were not preoccupied with serving others, cleaning glasses or switching barrels, I engaged the landlord or barperson in conversation, disclosing my research interest and asking about their business (in some cases these discussions continued later in a formal recorded interview conducted in person or over the telephone). In most cases, I then made subsequent visits to the same venue in the evening, often with my partner or other friends. In such cases, my visits were usually a little longer and involved a couple of drinks over a period of ninety minutes or so. Going to such venues with others was useful in terms of later discussing their impressions and experience of the

micropub, and correlating these with my own observations. It also made the act of taking photographs with my mobile phone less intrusive given the act of taking pictures on a night out with others generally appears quite normal (though is not that common in micropubs per se).

By participating in the rituals of alcohol consumption, I hoped to gain ‘authentic’ insight into the ways that micropubs foster sociality, noting that the embodied consumption of alcohol does not just instigate physiological and behavioural responses, but also social and cultural ones which are intimately shaped by the consumption of the space where one is drinking (see Jayne et al 2008). The downside of such an immersive, participatory approach was that I was unable to take notes or sound recordings in situ: the notes I wrote subsequently were no doubt somewhat schematic and impressionistic rather than rich in ethnographic detail (see also Sandiford and Seymour 2007 on the dilemmas of ethnographic work in a pub setting). Nonetheless, by drawing on a combination of photographs, interviews and fieldnotes, in this paper I aim to connect the materialities of the micropub to distinctive forms of embodied consumption which are charged with meaning for those who participate in them (see Latham and McCormack, 2004).

Into the micropub

July 2011, a bright summer's day. It's early evening when the three of us enter the pub, only to be confronted by a bewildering, and cluttered space. The single-room bar is ten foot by twelve, and looks like it would only seat around 10 with any degree of comfort, mainly on wooden stools and high benches that resemble church pews. There are dried, faded hops hanging in the windows, bar towels and beer tap clips from local breweries all over the walls and what we hope are fake pork chops, chickens and sausages hanging from the ceiling in a nod to the premises' previous life as a butcher's shop. There is no obvious indication as to what drinks are for sale, or how much anything costs. The landlord is in conversation with the other two customers who are present but he seems to sense our confusion – Where do we order? What is on offer? Where do we sit? – and encourages us to hang our jackets up and take a seat on the pew-like benches which mean we are sitting alongside one another, facing the other customers. He offers us ‘tasters’ of a local ESB (Extra Special Bitter) – a rich, full-bodied bitter that is both nutty and fruity – and approving it, we order three pints. Within minutes we are in conversation with the two other, older, customers, who ask us what we think of the beer, ask us where we are from and what has brought us to the pub (The Butcher's Arms, 14 August 2011).

The Butcher's Arms was opened by Martyn Hillier in 2005 in the village of Herne (Kent), offering an ever-changing roster of 3-4 beers mainly sourced from local breweries. With no bar food except crisps and pickled eggs, and no wine, spirits or lagers, Hillier's rationale for the micropub concept was that it was a means of providing 'a decent pint of beer' in a 'community-minded' setting:

It was a no-brainer. I didn't stop to think. It was perfect, plenty big enough — I hate big pubs — and I could make it into my dream pub and ban lager, jukeboxes, music, darts and quizzes, and cherry-pick the good bits, like real ale and good chat (Martyn Hillier, cited in Hawkes, 2011).

The first of its kind, *The Butcher's Arms* proved popular with locals and visitors from further afield, spawning 10 imitators by 2011, with double that by the end of 2012. This rose to 53 by 2013, with the first 'Micropub Guide' (published in 2017) featuring over 250, all adhering to the general blueprint offered by *The Butcher's Arms* of serving only cask-conditioned (or 'real') ale which is served without the use of pressurised gas (i.e. 'gravity-fed'). This focus on real ale gives such venues their *raison d'être*, and also their favourable reputation among the local planners and licensing officers who seem willing to facilitate their opening in locations where other pubs might be refused permission. Martyn Hillier suggests a possible explanation. 'We don't sell lager...beer has more hops which have a soporific effect. No one gets drunk in my pub, they get sleepy', he argues, continuing 'The police have never been called to break up a fight at a micropub.' When I speak to the chief licensing officer in Canterbury who dealt with the pub's application, he confirms this stereotype, suggesting that local residents are not particularly worried about micropubs because there is a perception they will be frequented by an older, discerning clientele of real ale enthusiasts (cf. the high-volume alcohol consumption of the type described by Chatterton and Hollands, 2003, as characteristic of corporate pub chains).

FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

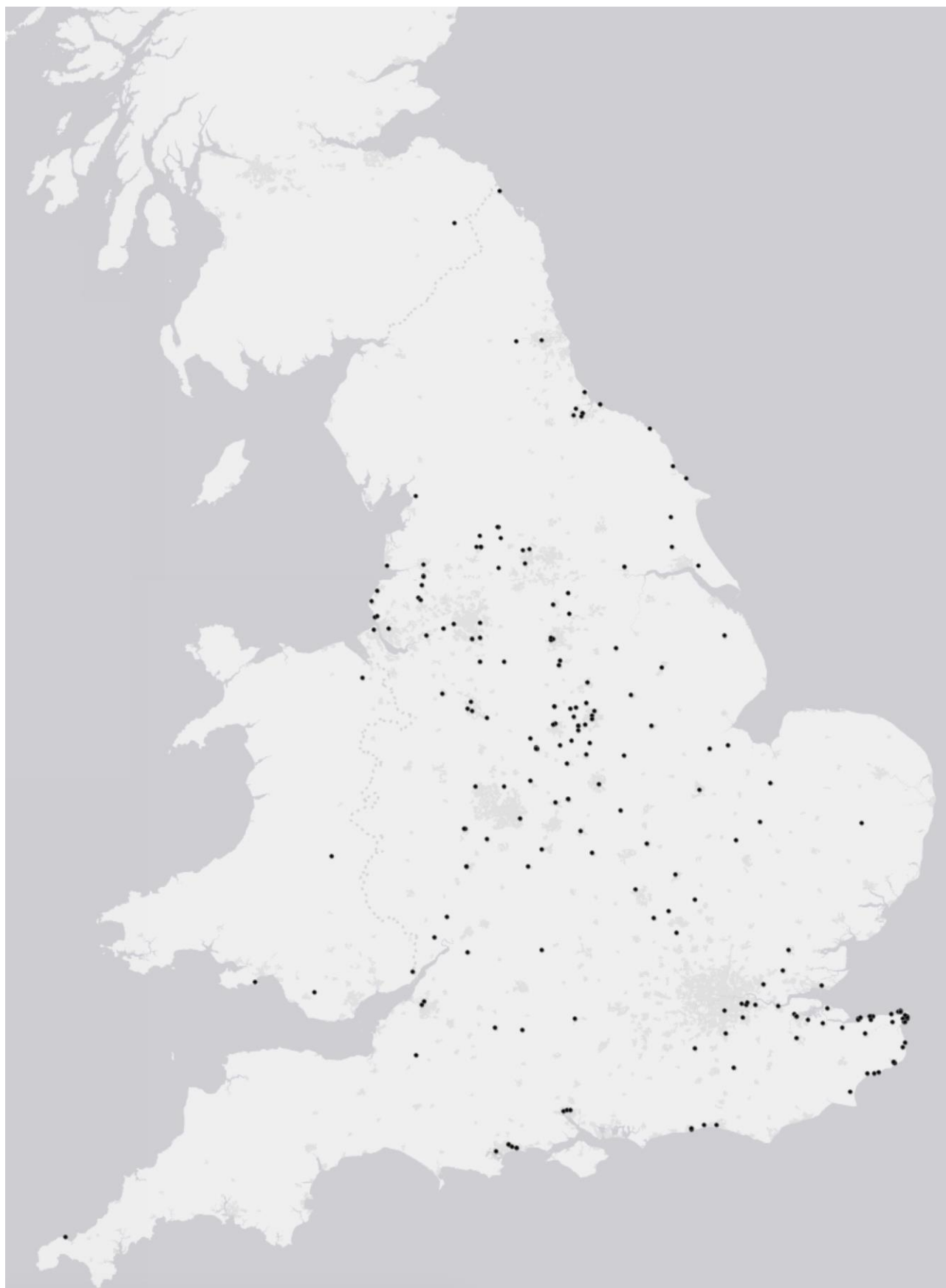


Figure One: Map of Micropubs in Britain, July 2016 (source Micropubs Association Membership list)

While the most obvious cluster of micropubs remains in Kent (a county closely associated with traditions of hop-growing and brewing), there are also significant numbers elsewhere in the South East (mainly along the south coast), with emerging clusters in the Midlands (especially in the Trent Valley), the North East (especially Middlesbrough and Teeside), and the North West (e.g. Colne and Burnley) (**Figure One**). As of 2016, Manchester and Middlesbrough both had four micropubs, Bristol, Nottingham, Southampton and Bournemouth three, but there remain none in Birmingham, Cardiff or Liverpool, nor some other cities where there is an established night-time leisure economy. Indeed, there are only three micropubs in London, all on the type of ‘ordinary’ and uncelebrated South London High Streets that serve local communities rather than tourist or visitor markets (Hall, 2011). This underlines that micropubs are located not in prime retail locations but on struggling secondary High Streets, provincial town centres or off-centre locations where the retail recession has created a surplus of vacant retail units that lend themselves to ‘pop up’ conversion. The cited cost of setting up a micropub ranges between £2,000 and £30,000, with hand pumps, beer cask stands, furniture and fittings easily sourced second-hand because of general attrition in the pub sector: the licence application can be as little as £100 dependent on the size of the venue. Moreover, so long as the turnover of the pub remains below £83,000 it does not need to be VAT (i.e. sales tax) registered.

FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE



Figure One: Blackboards (source: author)

By definition, micropubs are small-scale businesses, typically involving a sole owner or couple who oversee the conversion of a premise, source the beer, serve it and generally maintain the pub:

We came across the micropub model...and it fitted perfectly for us. We already loved pubs and had found them useful in many ways in our own lives. We loved real ale. The set up was fairly low-risk (we had the money saved to cover set up costs) and we thought we could see how we could earn a salary from this business idea. The model is very different from that of running a traditional pub, it requires less money and much less time (Landlord, Wales).

This said, what the ‘micropub model’ is remains moot. While there is a National Micropub Association (membership £10 per annum) not all landlord-owners are members. Equally, there are some premises that have styled themselves as micropubs but do not conform to the ‘rules’ of the micropub as they serve spirits and wines in addition to cask-conditioned ale, or serve imported bottled craft beers. In this sense, micropubs can probably be most easily distinguished by virtue of their design and setting, not by what they sell. Rather than having the multiple rooms characteristic of the traditional pub (something which promoted their partitioning along class and gender lines), micropubs always consist of a single room, with a single unisex toilet at the back and a small wash-up and storage area. The tables and chairs are often reclaimed (e.g. old pub tables and school chairs), with the seating arranged to encourage conversation between customers. The lack of a traditional ‘bar’, which is typically replaced by a short counter, means that the landlord can move around the premise, interacting with patrons, and bringing beer to them. Prominent in most is a chalkboard indicating current beers on offer, as well as coming ‘attractions’, their alcohol content, provenance and price (**Figure Two**), but otherwise decoration is minimal, and sometimes spartan. Micropubs do not offer entertainment in the form of bar games (such as pool or bar billiards), fruit machines, or TV, partly because they lack space, partly because they wish to avoid the need for a costly Public Entertainment licence and partly to foster conversation between customers. To that end, mobile telephone conversations are also discouraged, with signs half-jokingly suggesting that use of phones is punishable by way of a fine (payable to a local charity). Children are not permitted given licensing law dictates children cannot be present in a pub if there is no hot food being served. Opening hours are limited, typically 6pm –10 pm: most are closed on Mondays and many – but not all - do not open at all at lunchtimes, except at weekends.

FIGURE THREE HERE

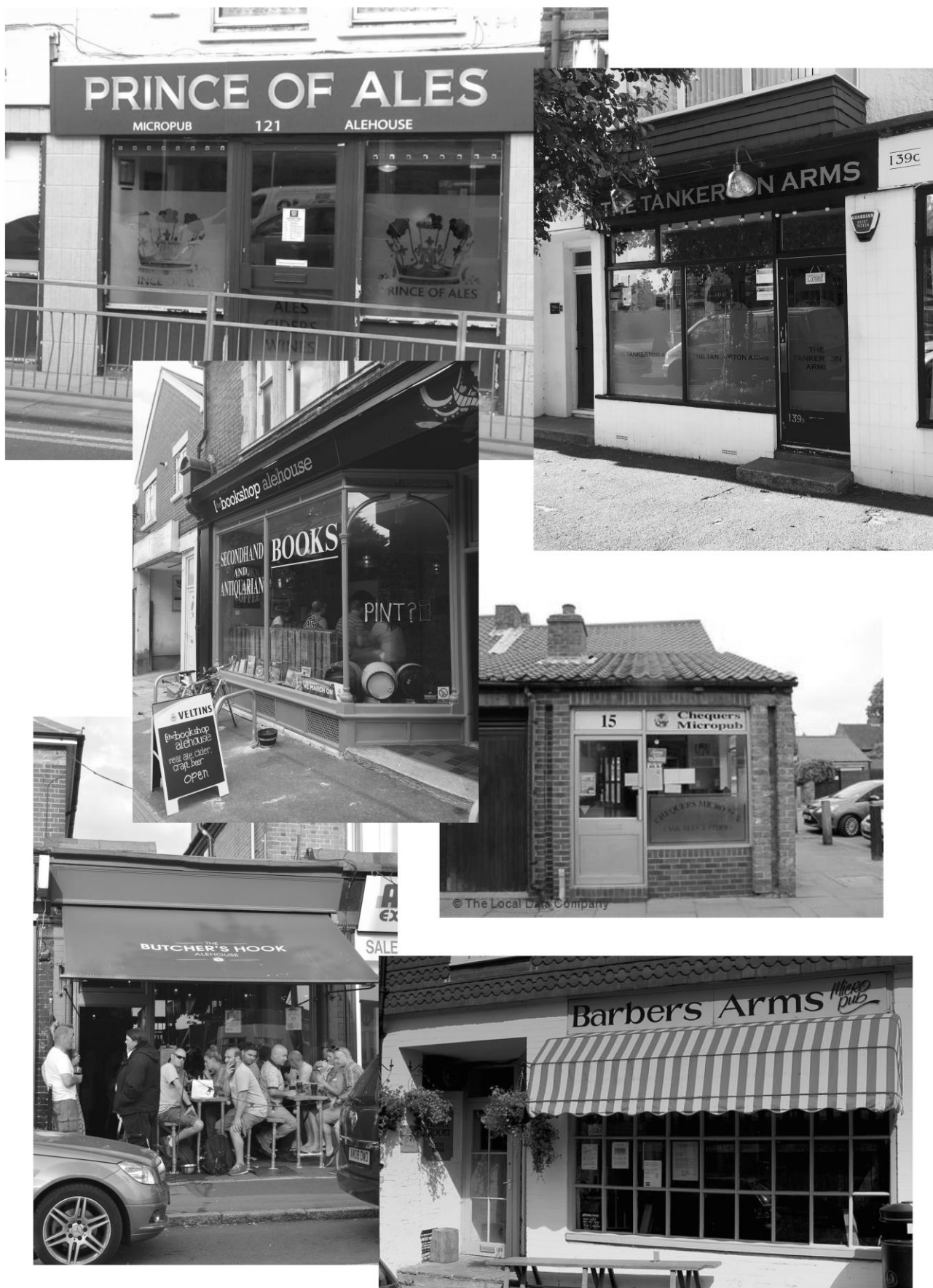


Figure Three: Micropub exteriors (source: author)

There are of course significant variations from this basic template, and some micropubs break the mould by offering a more extensive range of bar snacks. Others have board games and books that can be borrowed by customers, and one or two have nights where an acoustic performance is held or people can bring their own records to play in a vinyl revival evening. But all are premises which, in their past life, had other uses, as the names of many imply: *The Barber's Arms*, *The Old Post Office*, *The Bookshop Alehouse*, *Cobblers*, *The Bake and Alehouse*, *The Drapers' Arms*, and *The Overdraft* (in an old bank) (**Figure Three**). There are others that have taken root in even more unlikely premises, such as old station offices or bus waiting rooms, disused vets or garages under railway arches. This gives micropubs some of their quirky charm: the fact that they incorporate references to their past is partly expedient but partly by way of celebrating local distinctiveness and history (for example, the bank vault in *The Overdraft* would be hard to remove, but it makes an impressive store for casks of beer). In this way, micropubs de-familiarise space at the same time they reveal layers of lost meaning, and encourage drinkers to focus both on the particularities of local place as well as the changing nature of community (see also Harris's 2015 conceptualisation of the 'pop-up' as an interstitial space).

Drinking with enthusiasm

It's around eight o'clock on a Tuesday night, and the pub is relatively empty, five or so drinkers seated around the pub. I am at the small bar in the corner, waiting for my pint to settle. Another man enters, removing his hat and scarf and hanging these over a chair before sauntering to the bar. "Evening Andrew" he directs at the landlord - suggesting he is a 'regular' – "What you got on?". The landlord replies he's got a new red ale that he should like. The customer then turns to me and asks me what I am drinking, and what's it like. I tell him it's a ruby mild and good if you like that type of thing (the type of non-committal response I typically adopt in situations like this). The customer, who is I guess a few years older than me, says he'll have a taste of that. Andrew pours him a taster into a small glass, which the man drinks, nodding with approval. "That's alright, better than that session ale they did". He orders a pint, and hands a ten-pound note to Andrew, who hesitates at the till, turning round to ask the man if he has his 'card' (a reference to the fact that members of the Campaign for Real Ale get a 10% discount). The man confirms this, and receives his change, and pint, before going over to his seat (Furlongs, 10 November 2015)

Enthusiasm has been defined as ‘an emotional affiliation that influences our passions, performances and actions in space’ (Geoghagen, 2013: 45), and is clearly important in the decision to open, and run, a micropub. Indeed, the majority of owners said they did not anticipate their pub being a huge success or ‘money-making venture’. As one put it, ‘Micropubs can make a living for people who are prepared to work in them but are probably not great investments...a "lifestyle business" as a Dragon from the Den would say’ (landlord, South West). As such, many of those running micropubs are not entrepreneurs rolling out a new business model but people pursuing a hobby, their professional and personal lives entwined to the extent that the micropub can be seen as a business run according to a particular set of ideals rather than a strong profit-motive. Indeed, some owners have other, full-time jobs and run the micropub in their spare time, one suggesting ‘The hours are very manageable and mean we can balance the pub, our smallholding and family commitments’ (landlord, Wales).

The fact that the decision to open a micropub typically comes from someone’s interest in real ale means they can operate their business in a way that allows them to convey their enthusiasm to others, and can present themselves as ‘knowledge experts’ who can draw on a wealth of accumulated knowledge (cf Hracis et al 2013). But, more negatively, the hobby motive potentially constrains the owners’ decision-making capacities, and ability to run the pub in a more profitable manner (e.g. offering longer opening hours) (see Craggs et al, 2016 on the prohibitive dimensions of enthusiasm). This said, many landlords reported that they had been surprised by the number of customers ‘like them’ who appreciated the virtues of real ale served in a no-frills setting. As one suggested, ‘We simply set out to create a pub we’d want to drink in, where people would be able to have a friendly chat over a pint of beer’ (landlord, South East).

Acknowledging that micropubs appeal to a niche audience, landlords suggest that they have been able to make their business survive by cultivating loyalty among their customers:

The positive feedback from customers is reassuringly focused on the main things I’m aiming for from the pub - consistently good beer, friendly atmosphere and a place for convivial chat. The simpleness and unfussy nature of the pub really appeals to certain people. And, luckily there are enough of them to make it a sound business (landlord, South East).

As a business model, the micropub depends upon its ability to source real ales at competitive prices, keeping overheads and running costs low so it can serve beer at relatively affordable prices, typically in the range of £3-3.50 (as opposed to the more normal £3.50-£4.50 found in chain-owned or gastropubs). The majority are staffed by a single proprietor-landlord, though there can be a

second person present at busier times to help change barrels, serve and wash up glasses. Given most premises cannot accommodate more than 15-20 drinkers it is vital that pubs maintain a regular clientele of drinkers keen to sample from an ever-rotating choice of golden and pale ales, session beers, bitters and porters. According to landlords, this is not about attracting those looking for a quick pint as part of a crawl around multiple venues, but developing a dedicated base of real ale drinkers who will appreciate the quality of the beers on offer:

We are very evangelistic about our beer and actively ‘sell’ the beers we stock asking customers their preferences and offering tasters. We constantly change the brands available on the bar (landlord, North East).

On this basis, it can be suggested that part of the appeal of micropubs is not simply that they sell beer at competitive prices, but that they allow drinkers to acquire and display particular forms of *distinction*. After all, it is not simply a case of asking for a pint of the ‘usual’: drinking in a micropub demands the ability to peruse the blackboard and make sense of unfamiliar real ales and ‘microbrews’ to ascertain what they might be like:

We ensure that things are interesting, so they might be local, or one-off brews, not seen anywhere else in the town, not seen on the supermarket shelves. That way people seem to feel they are getting something different for their money and that the effort we put into sourcing things makes them feel they are getting something special... We keep things changing so customers are never sure what to expect, they come with expectancy to see what we have to offer (landlord, South East).

While it is the landlord who is the ‘curator’ of this space, sorting, organising, evaluating and ascribing value(s) to different beers (cf. Joosse and Hrac, 2013), both landlord and customer are expected to have knowledge of possible taste combinations, different breweries, types of beer and a studied appreciation of labels that celebrate quirky cultural references. It is this knowledge, rather than the ability to handle one’s drink, that marks out the real ale enthusiast (Thurnell Read, 2013). Unlike the corporate pub-chains that are associated with high volume consumption, bingeing or vertical drinking (Chatterton and Hollands, 2013), they are about quiet, leisured and slow appreciation. The lack of music means the atmosphere is far from exuberant, and, on quieter night, almost soporific. Rather than drinking to get drunk, and staying for four or five drinks, most have a couple of drinks over a couple of hours, and then leave for home (and here it is worth noting that most micropubs give the option for customers to take beer home in two-pint cartons at the same

price as drinking it on the premise). Drinking in this way is an exhibition of cultural capital: as Mathews and Picton (2014: 341) argue, the discriminating microbrew consumer works as an ‘agent of taste’, differentiating real ale as a premium product from ‘boringly mainstream’ mass-produced commercial beer (see also Spracklen et al, 2013).

Clearly, the clientele of micropubs can vary dependent on local demographics, but given the micropub concept is based on a logic of *imitation* (i.e. replicating certain design features and the wider ethos of the first micropubs), it would be surprising if the customer base were fundamentally different from place to place. Indeed, in the thirty or so I visited, the clientele was overwhelmingly white and male, typically aged 40 to 65: younger drinkers tended to be conspicuous within such spaces, and more likely to be in mixed gender groups rather than drinking alone or in couples. In all my time making observations in micropubs I witnessed many men drinking alone but never saw a woman enter the pub without a male companion (or as part of a group that included men) – the only exception being male landlords’ partners or wives assisting in the running of the venue. This stresses that the appreciation of ‘real ale’ a distinctly gendered activity: Thurnell-Read (2013: 3) argues ‘drinking is evidently a terrain through which both normalised and problematic embodiments of masculinity are enacted and policed’, continuing by arguing that ‘in a general sense, those who drink alcohol in a sensible manner can distinguish themselves from those seen to lack control’. Those in micropubs overwhelmingly conform to this ideal, their leisurely consumption showing they appreciate ‘real’ brewing and are drinking to enjoy the beer, not simply to get drunk. The distinction made between pubs and micropubs then is not just one of scale, but also one of status and social identity – something connected to what one drinks, where and how (Järvinen et al, 2014).

Following Thurnell-Read (2016: 72), it is possible to argue these are sites of *serious leisure* that, ‘in contrast to drinking as a fleeting “sensory pleasure” typical of casual leisure’ involves a ‘long-term activity where participants regularly and consistently develop their knowledge of beer and pubs, explore new tastes and seek out new beers and breweries’.. This is obvious in the forms of sociality in the micropub, which are often initiated via conversations about which beers are on, what they taste like and where they are from:

The real ale and cider provides a focus for conversation and breaking the ice. Regulars who know a bit more about the place can engage with new customers using this as a neutral and easy starting place for conversation. This changing range means that there is always something to talk about (landlord, Wales).

So while some customers might not necessarily think of themselves as ‘real ale enthusiasts’ or be members of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA), all are being inculcated into a set of rituals that involve a studied appreciation of the flavor and quality of real ale. A ‘mutual closeness’ develops through this process, producing a sense of identification and sociability that potentially produces positive emotions (Geoghegan 2013), and ultimately some degree of loyalty to the venue (most micropubs have Facebook groups or twitter accounts, and a few sell merchandise like t-shirts).

FIGURE FOUR HERE



Figure Four: Micropub sociality (source: author)

So while most conversations in the micropub are not about beer or brewing, the centrality of real ale consumption to the forms of sociality and leisure that it offers means that micropubs can also appear an exclusionary space for the uninitiated. Confronted by an unfamiliar range of beers, with

none of the brand names recognizable from the supermarket shelves, the unacquainted might struggle to respond to a landlord's question about what type of beer they would like, or fail to deploy the correct type of language when describing whether they like or dislike the beer. There is also the question of how one orders in a premise where there is sometimes not even a bar or counter to stand by. Given the micropub is, by definition, small, one cannot simply come in and then hide in a corner: everyone's behavior is open to scrutiny, and comment (**Figure Four**). Given the male-dominated nature of the micropub, this potentially reproduces these spaces as distinctly (but not uniformly) unwelcoming to women, reproducing the more general gendering of enthusiasm for real ale.

So while the rise of the micropub can be explained in economic terms as an opportunistic response to the current popularity of limited-run microbrews, and the coincident availability of cheap premises on the High Street that lend themselves to ready conversion to a no-frills alehouse, there is clearly a need to explore further how these spaces 'work' to valorize a particular commodity – real ale – via forms of active collaboration between customers and landlords that serve to emphasize the virtues of quality and tradition which real ales are taken to embody. This is a form of collaborative activity that is embodied, performative and even dramaturgical (in the sense that it follows certain scripts) but this should not distract from the materiality of the micropub itself and the way it creates a particular setting for consumption (see Wilkinson, 2017 on drinksapes and atmosphere). There is then a synergy here between the goods on offer, the way they are presented and the design of the premise. The sourcing of 'local' beer, the preference for limited-run brews and the emphasis on the individual rather than the serially-replicated all bequeath value on the act of consumption, and help create an 'authentic sense of self' for those frequenting these premises, something reliant on the pub itself appearing authentic.

Evoking authenticity

A summer's lunchtime. The pub is fairly-empty, and I'm reading through some draft student chapters. A man enters who looks like he's just come from the beach, dressed in shorts, vest and sandals, slightly sunburnt across his shoulders and with a panama hat on. He's in his mid-60s I would guess. From his demeanour I am not sure if he's been in here before: he's looking around to work out where to order. I tell him the landlord's round the back and should be back soon. About thirty seconds later the landlord appears and asks the man what

he's drinking: he plumps for an Indian Pale Ale. He then asks about food: the landlord apologises and says they don't do food, but explains "If you want you can go to the fish and chip shop two doors up and bring it in, or go to the butcher's over the road, they do a good pork pie". The man looks confused: "Really?" he asks. The landlord explains "Yes, you can bring in what you want really, so long as it's not from the bloody Tesco's [superstore]". He laughs. The customer leaves, goes over the road and comes back with a pie. The landlord produces a knife and plate from the backroom, and hands them to him. A few minutes later he enquires what the man thinks of the pie: he replies "That's a proper pie. And a proper pint"(Tankerton Arms, 16 July 2014).

In many ways, the rise of micropubs can be read as an outcome of the general consumer desire for authenticity (Zukin, 2008). The notion that the products they sell are 'real' and 'local' is clearly significant here in imbuing them with value, even if some of the goods do not fall squarely into these brackets (most micropubs have guest ales from further afield, and some also have 'kegged' beer on offer alongside cask-conditioned). The context here is that in the last decade or so there has been a reaction to the dominance of the beer market by large corporate breweries and the concomitant rise of a microbrew industry that is romanticised as offering an antidote to modern industrial production and mass consumption (Thurnell Read, 2014). This is part of a wider turn to craft and crafting, theorised by Sennett (2008) and others as part of a wider quest to reconnect consumers and producers. The notion that crafted goods are superior to mass-produced ones is of course questionable, but in beer production, as in other spheres, hierarchies of taste and value are currently constructed around the juxtaposition of the slow and small with the fast and large. On this basis, microbrewers claim their beer is made with both passion and pride, playing up the embodied and affective nature of their work (Thurnell Read, 2014). As producers they authenticate their own products by claiming they, and by extension their products, represent real, local culture: real-ale has, alongside 'real' and 'slow' food, become a widely-cited expression of small capitalism, locality, community and regionality.

Perceived authenticity is then a key part of the appeal of real ales, with the microbrewery industry predicated on localism, natural ingredients, and 'artisanal' small-scale production. But an important part of imbuing real ales with authenticity is that their producers link them with the past by stressing the continuing use of traditional production methods, and connecting this to the history of the physical location where the beer is made. There is an extensive literature on the way that microbreweries do this, and the fact that they can act as anchor points in post-industrial projects of urban renewal by catalysing new forms of production within the residue of industrial architecture

(Schnell and Reese, 2003; Mathews and Picton, 2014). This ‘neo-localism’ and reworking of existing motifs of industry comes with the attendant dangers of sanitizing the past given the traditions celebrated may not be ones associated with ‘good’ work, but more exploitative and dangerous forms of industrial labour. There are also risks in promoting microbreweries as flagships of urban creativity, craft and cool given such breweries forge a layer of niche consumption that can promote gentrification (though in a US context, Barajas et al, 2016, find no significant correlation between the opening of a micro-brewery and house values in the locality).

These type of observations might also be applied to the micropub, albeit with important caveats: micropubs are not microbreweries, and do not make their products in situ. Moreover, their potential for job creation is limited given most are minimally staffed. Nonetheless, they are viewed as a positive presence on the High Street precisely because they appear to celebrate the values of locality and authenticity that are associated with discerning and ethical forms of consumption. The fact they repopulate empty shops is significant given abandoned, whitewashed-windowed retail units can summon forth memories of mundane and familiar acts of shopping and socializing, juxtaposing these with a present in which such rituals appear to have been destroyed and lost forever (Hubbard, 2017). Reoccupying these spaces in a way that retains traces of the past is an important bridging device that roots this contemporary form of consumption in previous times and places. This can be as simple as retaining the façade of the previous shop, or naming the micropub in a way that reflects the building’s previous life. Some micropubs retain fixtures and fittings that indicate this: *The Butcher’s Hook* still has original tiling and butcher’s rails in place and the *Gas Lamp Lounge* remains lit by gas lanterns produced by the company that was based in the premise in the nineteenth century. Others make a point of celebrating defunct local industries. For example, *The Paper Mill* in Sittingbourne is located in a former painting and decorators shop, but its name celebrates the newspaper printing industry that dominated the town from the eighteenth century until the closure of the Bowater Mill in 2007 and *The Weavers* in Kidderminster celebrates the now-dwindling local carpet industry. More generally, many names of micropubs make reference to traditional brewing processes and ingredients: e.g. *The Hop and Barley*, *The Mash Tun* and *The Fuggle & Nugget*.

FIGURE FIVE HERE



Figure Five: Micropub interiors (source: author)

But authenticity is dependent on more than direct references to the past, being materialised in a stripped-down aesthetic that feigns timelessness:

For me, what's crazy about normal pubs is the amount of money that's getting shovelled into putting stuff in that people really don't care about. You'll get youngsters who want the latest, greatest, trendiest place, but as soon as somewhere better down the road opens, it's not trendy any more (landlord, North East).

So while the design of many micropubs is carefully thought-through (with some owners explaining they had visited the original micropubs in Kent and measured their furniture to replicate this elsewhere), this is resolutely not about being 'on trend' but expressing notions of authenticity. Significantly, this is not about replicating the appearance or style of traditional British pubs: instead, the basic, no-frills design of many micropubs, with their simple wooden furniture, bare bulbs and exposed brickwork appears more in keeping with the new 'vernacular' of creativity: a stripped-back aesthetic which Hatherley (2016) mocks as a form of 'austerity nostalgia' (**Figure Five**).

Here, it is worth noting that while micropubs are typically in urban locations that serve diverse communities, the micropub turns its back on many potential models of 'cosmopolitan retailing' and instead revels in an atmosphere that privileges 1950s utility-ware, pork scratchings and 'proper' British beer over the cultural imports of the more recent past. Like many of the other businesses championed by those arguing for High Street regeneration – e.g. farmer's markets, vintage shops, and 'real' coffee shops – the micropub is freighted with nostalgia, harkening back to an imagined era when the British High Street served all in society, and local shopping streets propped up the myth of a more equal post-war society (Watson and Wells, 2005). This of course hints at further exclusions surrounding the micropub, a space that basically only caters for those who are able to consume alcohol: significantly, all but one of the micropubs in England and Wales are run by white proprietors, and very few offer non-alcoholic drinks, tea or coffee. Equally, many are characterized by artefacts and signs which invoke banal nationalism: for example, the repeated use of the Union Jack flag, references to the 'Great British' pint and so on: one of my visits to a micropub memorably coincided with the Queen's birthday, with the landlord offering cut-price pints of limited-run 'Queen Bee' beer he had sourced from Jennings Brewery. As such, they are sites where a particular association between alcohol consumption, whiteness and Britishness is reproduced (see

Spracklen et al 2013), in contrast to the franchised cafés like *Costa* or *Starbucks* which Jones et al (2015) argue offer a convivial setting for inter-ethnic encounter which is based on the consumption of non-alcoholic beverages.

Curating community

Early Sunday evening on a sweltering hot day, we've been driving most of the day and decide to stop at the pub to cool down. Others have the same idea – it's as busy as I've seen this pub, and even the picnic tables they place out on the street are full. We buy a pint and a half of a mango-infused beer which seems a bit gimmicky compared with the other beers on offer, but is certainly refreshing. We stand by the door for a few minutes, until a couple leave, and we take their seat, around a table where there are already four others sitting. As I sit down, however, I accidentally kick the water bowl I hadn't noticed below the table, not realising one of the men had his terrier dog with him. I apologise to him and he tells me not to worry, and the landlord runs over and mops the water up with a cloth, replenishing the bowl. A few minutes later the dog's owner turns to the other three people round the table – who it is clear he is not with – and asks them if they can watch his dog as he's going for a "smoke". He disappears for a few minutes before returning with a shopping bag, apologising that he'd been gone for longer than he expected. They tell him it was no problem. Within a few minutes we are all deep in conversation about the dog, how well behaved it is and where it lives (The Butcher's Hook, 29 June 2014)

Despite the obvious limits on who uses micropubs, or can feel at home in them, most landlords claim part of their reason for opening their premise was wanting to create a community-centred space. In many cases, the motivation for opening a pub did not appear motivated solely by profit, but was imbued with moral purpose:

We wanted to earn a living in a different way from how we had previously (e.g. working for others, working in jobs that relied on the public purse), so this meant working for ourselves and ensuring that the money that we did make aligned with our values. A principle one being that money that we earn is voluntarily given to us in exchange for a product/service that is wanted by our customers in exchange for their money (or other things – we have exchanged drinks for many things e.g. pheasants, putting up shelves, sign writing, cakes, advice, a trout!) (landlord, Wales).

This notion of generosity extends in many cases to a belief in the redemptive power of the micropub and its ability to heal fragmented communities and broken High Streets. Many owners extol the virtues of the micropub for 'injecting life' to High Streets with high levels of vacancy, and most suggest their venue filled a niche that corporate-owned pubs could not. Here, much emphasis was put on the fact that the micropub effectively straddles the conventional worlds of daytime shopping and night-time leisure, typically shutting much earlier than the corporate owned pubs which are associated with high volume consumption and attendant anti-sociality (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). As one landlord stated, 'we're part of the longest road of independent shops in the UK; it's very busy during the day - and has a vibrant restaurant and night economy as well. We feel we connects nicely into the gap between' (Landlord, South West).

Others landlords insist that their real achievement has been in 'bringing back' consumers to the High Street: 'people who had stopped going out are our main customer base, we have given them a reason to leave the house' (Landlord, West Midlands). As another landlord suggested:

My customers are mainly of a mature generation that remember old-fashioned community hub pubs. They love the atmosphere of a meeting place where people actually talk to each other and develop friendships. It a non-threatening safe environment free of loud music, and lairy lager louts which is a country mile away from mainstream pubs that are full of TVs, Jukeboxes, and slot machines and kids that are only too eager to want a fight on a Saturday evening (landlord, South East).

While this mythologisation of the traditional pub as a community hub fails to acknowledge the way such spaces can be gendered, racialised, aged and classed, the idea that a micropub can plays a prominent role in bringing people together is frequently voiced:

The other side effect from the pub being in the...neighbourhood is the impact it's had on local people. There are a group of people who are now friends with each other because of the pub. People have talked about how they didn't really know anyone in the area before, and the pub opening has meant that local people have met and developed friendships. The [*micropub*] has become a focal point for their social lives (landlord, East Midlands).

Owners regularly report that they feel their pubs help the community: 'people have made friendships and positive connections that were not there before...we are the best thing to happen to the town for years!' (landlord, North West). Landlords feel that the way they run the micropub is especially important in this regard:

We have created a calm and safe atmosphere. We acknowledge everyone, we engage as much as we can with everyone. We also have created a sense of joint responsibility for the place. Our customers follow our lead and welcome others, nearly everyone that drinks with us brings their glasses back, they tell us if something is amiss, they even change the loo roll! We tried to create a place where people can get a sense of belonging, a feeling that they exist (landlord, Wales).

The notion of a ‘socially connective’ consumer experience is relevant here, theorized by O’Brien (2017) as any form of consumption that provides an everyday kind of sociality through a physical presence, but which also creates a deeper social connectivity by offering diverse participatory activities. While corner shops, public libraries, bookshops and cafés have frequently been hypothesized as socially-connective (Hodgetts et al, 2008; Everts, 2010; Jones et al, 2015), pubs remain central to many British imaginings of community (Cabras, 2011), meaning they are often depicted as having the ability to promote shared social values.

The idea that micropubs will be community-oriented spaces is something understood by owners before they take on premises, with some targeting shopping streets that they felt offered little by way of leisure facilities for local populations. One couple suggested that their main motivation for opening a micropub was ‘bring people together and support the local community’, something informing the design of the pub’s interior space:

We wanted a friendly and welcoming atmosphere; we used recycled timber to build the tables and benches and designed them so that people can stand or sit and be able to converse at eye level. There are no bar stools making it easier for people to engage in conversation and not restrict our ability to serve and for people to communicate with one another. There is deliberately no bar to prevent a barrier between ourselves and our customers and prevent people congregating in one area (landlord, South West).

This notion of designing for conviviality was frequently invoked by owners, with much emphasis on the idea that customers were being welcomed into an inclusive space:

We wanted a very friendly and welcoming pub, which is why we have furnished it the way we have. Our tables are high and there is a step up to sit on the bench one side and stools the other, this means that whether you sit or stand everyone is at a similar height. We do not have seating at the end of the tables which encourage conversation either side. When we are

busy we encourage people to share tables, in fact our regulars like it when new people join their table (Landlord, South East).

The model here is derived from *The Butcher's Arms* and some of the other micropubs in Kent that adopted a similar layout of high, pew-style seating arrayed around high tables with hooks for coats and bags. However, not all have followed this precise model, recognizing its limitations:

We built a bar that has bar stools so as to invite people to stay at the bar should they wish. We also have tables and chairs providing places for people to sit together but also places where people can just go and sit alone. We know that some people come in and get straight on with the socialising but others need to come in first and hide, watch what is going on, get a feeling for a place before they feel comfortable in the mix, others just want to spend time alone in the pub. We try and provide places in the pub that will suit different needs (landlord, West Midlands).

In either case the notion that the micropub provides a *homely* space is the fore: landlords frequently make reference to the idea that when someone enters a micropub it is as if they are coming into their living room or kitchen: 'The atmosphere I wanted was as if you had people drinking in your kitchen and I think that's often achieved' (landlord, South West).

Given that most micropubs are not particularly profitable, seeing the micropub become a community facility is clearly important to many of those who have opened them, and helps justify the costs and time which some put in to their business. As one stated, 'The rewards of running a micropub are that I make a reasonable living doing something enjoyable and fun. It is rewarding when people have a good time in your pub' (landlord, South East). Another argued 'the rewarding aspects are definitely seeing the social interaction happening, having seen many friendships made which should be partly what pubs should be about' (landlord, South West) while one claimed the main positive of his venture had been 'Meeting the customers and forming social relationships with our regulars' (landlord, South East). For some this appears to compensate for the fact they often work unsociable hours, cannot take holidays and that their home life is disrupted, as one claimed:

The positives are the nice things people say – they just love our quirky little place. The big downside is that we are just too small: we do not have enough storage space (our cellar is a wooden shed) all other stock is kept in a room at home. We are constantly replenishing stock which means lots of walking up and down a hill with bags of bottles, crisps, floats, loo

rolls, towels, cleaning materials and so on (landlord, Wales).

This hints at the tensions at the heart of the micropub model: small enough to offer a homely atmosphere, and to encourage interaction, it is not necessarily large enough to be highly-profitable, and relies upon the enthusiasm of owners who are prepared to invest in their business because of the intangible rewards it bestows upon them in terms of being ‘community fixers’.

Conclusion

The ‘pop-up’ phenomenon is much discussed, sometimes dismissed as a fleeting symptom of austerity, at other times heralded as the beginning of a more inclusive form of urbanism (Harris, 2015). Distinct from US-style microbreweries, micropubs are a distinctly British pop-up concept emerging from a particular combination of circumstances including the availability of empty premises on declining shopping streets, relaxed licensing laws and an established enthusiasm for ‘traditional’ and locally-produced real ales. Arguably, they also tap into the mood of nostalgia that has become valued in a time of austerity (Hatherley, 2016), offering relatively affordable beer in a setting that extols the virtues of simplicity and craft. Although originally envisaged as a temporary use of space, they have become seemingly permanent features on the shopping streets where they are found, having found a niche as a key site of sociality for those (older) drinkers who might otherwise shun the High Street in the evening because of its association with more exuberant and carnivalesque behaviour (Haydock, 2015). This given, micropubs are often depicted as a benevolent presence on the High Street at a time when other shops and pubs are closing, and despite their modest scale, very little active marketing, and a limited social media presence, many have gained a secure foothold on local High Streets at a time when beer sales in general are declining.

This noted, the belief that micropubs are a panacea for the problems of the recessionary High Street (West, 2015), or a night-time economy beset with violence and anti-sociality (Hadfield, 2006), needs to be held in tension with the observation that they are socially and cultural exclusive in a variety of ways. As Jayne et al (2008) stress, drinking alcohol is both a marker of belonging associated with the construction of identities and a strategic use of leisure space that excludes others. This observation is particularly important given micropubs are, by definition, spaces of real

ale consumption: as Spracklen et al (2013) show, real ale enthusiasts promote real ale as an expression of authenticity, locality, community and regionalism as well as a marker of good taste and distinction. But all these notions are of course contested, not least because they are reliant on nostalgic imaginings of nationhood and identity which reproduce existing hierarchies of class, race, age and gender in a sometimes unquestioned or banal manner. So while they appear popular with a particular demographic of white, middle-aged men, as things stand, it is hard to see how such venues might potentially open up to a wider base of drinkers, let alone how they might ever accommodate those who do not drink alcohol at all.

Nonetheless, given the importance of alcohol as a marker of taste and distinction in the urban West (Jayne et al, 2008), the micropub format remains worthy of further attention, not least because it stresses that contemporary night-life is not a homogeneous time-space, offering a variety of different styles and spaces of drinking (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). As a space of ‘quiet’ and cultured drinking, micropubs do not fit into the stereotypes that often circulate in writing on night-time economies about alcohol’s association with anti-sociality and overindulgence (Hadfield, 2006). While they offer relatively cheap alcohol, and often trade on the association between real ale and working class identities rooted in traditions of craft and industry, micropubs are manifestly not places where drinking to excess is normal: it is more about demonstrating one is in control and can exercise good taste. As Spracklen et al (2013) argue, drinking real ale is a deployment of cultural capital, and a form of distinction, that rejects the standardized taste cultures associated with more commonplace pub chains and formats. Though beyond the scope of this paper, the idea that micropubs might ultimately contribute to the gentrification of nightlife is one worth exploring further, not least because they attract the types of drinkers whose status in the ‘hierarchy of cultural prestige and legitimacy’ has been elevated in recent years by the ‘turn’ to real ale and microbrew appreciation (Thurnell Read, 2016: 79). Like many other forms of pop-up urbanism, micropubs hence need to be evaluated as community-focused sites that might, over time, become associated with processes of commodification, gentrification and displacement.

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